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Next Chapter

Preserving a Family Legacy

AFD Profile
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the Next Chapter

Preserving a family legacy

For Dawn Sailors Fisher, becoming a widow at 48 could have brought her life to a screeching halt. Instead, the experience of going from being happily married to a widow in one shocking moment brought Dawn a realization that she had a calling – to follow in her funeral director husband's footsteps and preserve the family legacy.

Dawn and her late husband, John David (J.D.) Fisher, 49, were that quintessential storybook couple. They first met, Dawn laughingly recalls, when they were both in line to see Santa Claus at a Masonic Lodge Christmas party. "I was a baby and he was a toddler," she laughed. "An older man."

Both sets of parents were active in many of the same Logansport, Ind., organizations so it was natural that their children would end up spending time together. "It was just very natural and easy for us to spend time together," Dawn said. "We were just right together." And while it may not have been their first "official" date, Dawn still vividly recalls the Halloween night she accompanied J.D. in a hearse to pick up a body from a local airport. "There we were, sitting in the hearse waiting to pick up the body," she said. "There was an electrical storm going on, so there was lightning streaking across the sky … and we just watched the sky light up. It was really romantic."

That J.D. was the son of a funeral director – and had plans to follow in his father's footsteps – didn't bother Dawn in the least. "My parents did me a huge favor when I was growing up," Dawn explained. "They dragged me to every funeral they went to, so I was accustomed to funerals. By taking me to all those visitations, they did me a huge favor; they helped me not fear death."

Life was good for Dawn Sailors. She was dating the boy of her dreams and planning on attending college. But in the middle of her senior year of high school – and six days after her 18th birthday – Dawn's father, Don Sailors, died unexpectedly. "He had amyloidosis and had been sick for about six months but had a sudden heart attack from the effects of the disease and medication," Dawn said. "It was totally unexpected. I helped do CPR on him for over a half hour while an ambulance was lost in a snowstorm. I felt like it was my fault because my efforts failed."

J.D.'s dad, John W. Fisher, owner of the Fisher Funeral Chapel in Logansport, handled funeral arrangements. J.D., in his first year of mortuary school, lent much needed emotional support to Dawn and her mother.

Best Friends

It came as a surprise to no one that J.D. and Dawn said their "I dos" on June 14, 1981. They were each other's best friend. "J.D., he was just the most special person," Dawn said. "It's hard to put it into words … loving, caring, compassionate, thoughtful, dedicated, dependable … the list goes on and on. He was simply the love of my life."

There was no question that J.D. would follow in his father's funeral director footsteps – or that Dawn would be right by his side. While not a funeral director herself, Dawn worked side by side with her husband, learning every aspect of the business.

In 1990, the couple purchased the family business, and four years later broke ground for a new chapel. In

Tips for better work-life balance:

It wasn't that long ago that the boundaries between work and home were fairly well defined. No longer. Increasingly, work is likely to invade personal life. Experts from The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., offer these tips for maintaining a work-life balance:

Track your time. Pay attention to your daily tasks, including work-related and personal activities. Decide what's necessary and what satisfies you the most. Cut or delegate activities you don't enjoy or can't handle.

Learn to say "no." Whether it's a co-worker asking you to spearhead an extra project or your child's teacher asking you to organize a class party, remember that it's OK to respectfully say "no." When you quit accepting tasks out of guilt or a false sense of obligation, you'll have more time for the activities that are meaningful to you.

Leave work at work. With the technology to connect to anyone at any time from virtually anywhere, there might be no boundary between work and home – unless you create it. Make a conscious decision to separate work time from personal time. When you're with your family, for instance, keep your laptop in your briefcase.

Manage your time. Organize household tasks efficiently, such as running errands in batches or doing a load of laundry every day, rather than saving it all for your day off. Put family events on a weekly family calendar and keep a daily to-do list. Do what needs to be done and let the rest go.

Bolster your support system. At work, join forces with co-workers who can cover for you – and vice versa – when family conflicts arise. At home, enlist trusted friends and loved ones to pitch in with child care or household responsibilities when you need to work overtime or travel.

Nurture yourself. Eat a healthy diet, include physical activity in your daily routine and get enough sleep. Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as practicing yoga or reading. Better yet, discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends – such as hiking, dancing or taking cooking classes.

2003, J.D. decided to expand into the growing Lafayette area by purchasing the former Landis-Loy Funeral Home, now known as the Fisher-Loy Funeral Chapel.

For Dawn, who graduated from Indiana University, family was everything. She and J.D. lived for many years in the housing above the funeral home. It was the perfect solution: She could help J.D. with the business and be there for the couple's growing family – Jonathan, David and Sarah (son Chase would be born later).

"There are so many memories there," Dawn said. "Jonathan streaking into a visitation covered in spaghetti sauce; Jacob crawling under chapel pews." For the Fishers it was a life filled with many more pluses than minuses. "The kids had to learn to be quiet, and we really couldn't have a dog," Dawn said. "And while they didn't have a backyard to play in, they did have a parking lot – and a four-car garage to ride their bicycles."

In a life filled with bright spots, there were times of sadness. In 1988, the couple's son, Daniel, died 61 minutes after birth. "Jonathan was almost 3 when we learned our baby did not have kidneys and would die in the womb from lack of amniotic fluid or be stillborn," Dawn recalled. "After three weeks of tests, he was delivered early. We got to baptize him and love him during that short time. I had time before his birth to sew two sailor suits ... one for a boy, one for a girl ... so we'd have something small enough for the baby to wear." It's something, she added, that she's done many times since for other preemies.

"We picked out our cemetery spots, ordered a steel casket and vault so everything would be in place when we got home from the hospital," Dawn said. "It impacted our lives and gave us insight and compassion in working with parents who had lost a child."

As the years went by, Dawn took on more responsibility in the business. "I was the person behind the scenes, filling in whenever necessary," Dawn explained. "And I started writing the obituaries … I just loved to write and I wanted to make sure the people who died were remembered for who they were." She and J.D. were the proudest of parents when oldest son, Jonathan, revealed that he would be attending mortuary school and would be the third generation in the family firm.

A Love Lost

In early 2009, J.D. began complaining of back problems. At first, the symptoms were dismissed – a pulled muscle from shoveling snow, part of the job. But the pain continued to get worse. An MRI determined the cause: A tumor was growing on J.D.'s spine. Doctors told the couple surgery was too risky.

It was not the news the couple wanted to hear, and Dawn quickly turned to the Internet for solutions. Her research led the couple to Dr. George Jallo at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. Jallo would do the surgery – but not before delivering some startling news: While there was no way for certain to know what caused J.D.'s tumor, chemicals such as formaldehyde have been known to cause tumors.

J.D. successfully made it through surgery, and when Jallo revealed the tumor was noncancerous, the couple was cautiously optimistic. By this point, J.D. and Dawn had been away from their four children and the business for two weeks. They were looking forward to getting back to Logansport.

Things were looking up on the morning of April 8. Dawn was in her hotel room preparing to go over to the hospital when her phone rang. Dawn heard the voice on the other end of the line say "heart attack" and "pulmonary embolism." "The only thing I could ask was, 'Is he dead?'" Dawn recalled. The voice softly responded, "Yes."

Dawn was immediately escorted to the hospital – "I didn't want him to be alone," Dawn said softly. Her mind was racing in a million different directions. "How do I tell the kids?" "What should I do?" "What about the kids?" "What about the business?" "What am I going to do now?" "How do I tell his mother and father?"

Four years later, Dawn credits God for the strength and sharpness in thinking she was given. A close friend was dispatched to the house to be with the children. J.D.'s sister in Chicago was called and asked to deliver the news to his parents. Flights were booked. Calls to the accountant were made. And after the death certificate was signed and arrangements made to transport J.D.'s body back home, Dawn laid down for the last time with her husband in his hospital bed.

Overcome with grief, Dawn knew she needed to be strong for her children. She took a picture of J.D. because Jonathan needed to see with his own eyes that his father had died. She spent time crying with and hugging her children. "We will make it," she told her children, time and again.

There was no question that Fisher Funeral Chapel would handle the arrangements. "J.D. had told me something a long time ago, and I always remembered it," Dawn said. "Someone had come up to him and asked him how he could do what he did for a living. J.D. looked the person straight in the eye and told him, 'I get to care for someone who has just seen the face of God, and can you imagine what they are seeing?'"

Dawn also turned to former first lady Jackie Kennedy for inspiration. "I told my kids, we are going to do this, and do it well," Dawn said. "She showed the nation how to grieve when her husband died ... we have to show this community how we grieve and rise above the card we've been dealt."

She drew strength from widows like her mom and Jackie who did everything in their power to help their kids deal with death and create a new normal. "One of Jackie's quotes has been imprinted on my brain: 'If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do well matters very much,'" Dawn said. "It became my focus."

A New Chapter

It was also imperative that the

Above: Dawn Fisher with the "Generations" photo which is displayed proudly in the funeral home lobby. Right: Dawn Fisher and her sons, Jacob, 23, (left) and Jonathan, 27. (*Photos courtesy of Fisher Funeral Chapel/Rich Voorhees, Voorhees Studios*)

family business would continue for the third generation of Fishers. "From the minute I was coming back on the plane I was thinking about how I was going to keep the business running, how I was going to pay the mortgage," Dawn said. "I didn't know how I was going to do it; all I knew was Fisher Funeral Chapel was staying in business."

To anyone in the Logansport community who was wondering what was next for Fisher Funeral Chapel, J.D.'s obituary – written by Dawn – left no doubt. "*On behalf of his entire family, we thank our loyal patrons and ask for your continued support as we*

work to carry on his legacy. Many have asked 'Is there anything we can do to help?' The answer is simple – refer Fisher Funeral Chapel to your family and friends during their time of loss – we are open for business as usual – and we need your patronage. The Fisher family and staff will do everything in their power to merit the trust that the community has placed in their hands as we carry on J.D.'s tradition of excellence in funeral service."

The first order of business, Dawn decided, was for her to return to school to become a licensed funeral director. "Our business was started by my in-laws and passed down to the second generation and I wanted to help our kids become the third generation," she explained. "And nothing – or no one – was going to stand in my way. I'm a mama bear, and you don't mess with my kids."

Having previously obtained bachelor's and master's degrees, Dawn was prepared to hit the books – but she would end up having to do it online. "At the time, my two youngest kids were in fourth and seventh grades, and I had to keep everything happy and normal at home," she said. "I wanted to be at home at night."

Dawn had initially thought she would attend mortuary school close to home but was told by a local school official that her application would not be accepted because "there was no way I would finish because I was older, had kids and a business to run."

Determined to prove the woman wrong, Dawn applied to the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service – and did her coursework online. "I was not going to fail … that wasn't even a choice," she said.

It's been a hectic few years for the Fisher family. Jonathan graduated from Mid-America College of Funeral Service and became a licensed funeral director and embalmer in 2006; he is the manager of the Lafayette facility. Jacob graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in 2012 and will be licensed by summer.

Dawn's journey is almost over as well. The countless hours of studying have paid off and not even a pesky bleeding retina could stop her. In August she traveled to New York for her Capstone Experience. "I conquered a lot of fears being in New York City by myself," she laughed. Later that same month she and her mother traveled to Schaumburg, Ill., for the National Board Exam. A bumble of nerves, Dawn was calmed by, of all things, IKEA. "I passed the IKEA store on my way to the test and for some reason I knew everything was going to be OK," she recalled. "I told myself that if I passed the test I would get myself something from IKEA." She did – and she did.

Long before her before her husband, J.D., became ill, he showed Dawn a photo of the weeping angel monument, saying, "If anything ever happens to you, I'd pick this stone for you." After his death, she chose this monument for the couple. (*Photo courtesy of Dawn Fisher*)

With her internship nearly over and only her state board exam to be taken by the end of the year, Dawn is this close to realizing her dream of becoming a licensed funeral director.

A dream, she is quick to point out, that wouldn't have been possible without her support network.

Among the people on her list is Marvin Griest, who has been a funeral director at Fisher's since 1974. "He has helped us through the last four years immensely," Fisher said. "He is like family to us … he has always been there for me and is my biggest supporter." Although Griest was diagnosed in January 2011 as having lung cancer, it was later determined that it was just scar tissue. "It gave us all a scare, another 'what else could go wrong?'"

Then there's accountant Ron Cooper of Cooper & Associates. "He never gave up on me and has probably listened to more long distance sobbing and panic than any accountant ever," Dawn said.

Cooper has worked closely with her to put the Fisher Funeral Chapel on the right financial footing. With Cooper's guidance, Dawn was able to get a Small Business Administration loan to help cut her interest rate in half after a mortgage lender felt "insecure" after J.D.'s death and charged her default (higher interest) rates. "I've learned a lot in the past four years ... plowing snow, building maintenance, quick books, mortgage/finance essentials, casket manufacturer contracts, budgeting, removals, operating the cot, car maintenance ... not to mention taking on a college schedule, running a household on my own and caring for my mother and in-laws' health needs."

Her biggest praise, though, is reserved for her children – her strength and support. "They are the best of

J.D. and me," she said. "If it wasn't for the kids, I don't know that I would have gone on."

You only have to listen to Jonathan and Jacob Fisher for a moment to understand how proud they are of their mother. They talk in glowing terms about her dedication, her determination, her upbeat attitude, compassion, and her belief in God and family. "She's a great mother, and she's going to be a great funeral director," Jonathan said. "No question about it."

The 27-year-old always knew he was going to be a funeral director. It was his destiny to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps. "It was what I was meant to do, and I could not imagine doing anything else."

Jacob feels the same way. He was a senior in high school when his father died, but there was no push from his mother – or anyone else in the family – to attend mortuary school, the 23-year-old insists. "I wanted to work in the business that my grandfather and father built," he explained. "I've watched it grow over the years and I've known that I wanted to be a part of it."

While Jonathan was already a licensed funeral director by the time Dawn returned to school, Jacob was also a student. "We have the same method of studying, and we were able to help each other," he said. "There was no question she was going to make it."

Although she was juggling school, working at the funeral home and managing the business, their mom was never too busy for her children. "We always knew she was there for us, no matter what," Jonathan said. "I don't know how she's done it all, but she's made it look easy … and that's truly a gift."

Looking back, Dawn isn't quite sure how she's been able to juggle everything, but she is certain she knows why – she didn't have a choice. If a particular subject was difficult to understand, she just studied harder; if a body needed to be picked up, she answered the call; if a school event was on the calendar, her schedule was juggled; if business declined after J.D.'s death, she worked harder to get the word out that Fisher Funeral Chapel was there to serve the needs of families.

Through it all, she's instilled in the third generation of Fisher Funeral Chapel funeral directors that everyone needs to be treated fairly. "We believe that everyone should have a proper service with dignity," Jonathan said, "and we try to make the funeral service as valuable as possible for each and every family we serve."

Role Model

There's no question that Dawn Fisher is a role model for her children.

"I think part of the reason she went back to school is to show our younger siblings that when the going gets tough, the tough keep going," Jonathan pointed out. "You just have to keep going."

Jacob is quick to agree. "She's shown us that you can't let other people define you, that you have to define yourself," he noted. "I'm sure there are some competitors who thought we would go out of business, but that's not the case … we're here in two locations serving families. Each year it's getting better and better. And I know our dad would be so proud of her."

Part of her story has been told on the funeral home's two Facebook pages (one for each location), in part because Dawn wants other people in her situation to know that she has walked in their shoes, that even in the darkest days there is light.

"If you had asked me five years ago if I would be going back to school to be a funeral director, I would have laughed," she said. "I was a stay-at-home mom who helped her husband in his business. But sometimes your circumstances change – and you have to change with them."

Fisher is comforted that Jonathan and Jacob are there for support when it comes to making business decisions. "This is their legacy, and I can count on them to help make some of the decisions that have to be made," she said. "Their father trained them well … I know he's looking down on them."

Whether Sarah, 16, or Chase, 13, will also follow in their father's footsteps is anyone's guess. "Sarah's thinking about becoming a pediatrician, and Chase, he doesn't know what he wants to do yet," Dawn said. "And that's OK. They'll have my support in whatever they do in life … it's that mama bear thing."

Dawn is rarely at a loss for words, but when asked where she sees herself in five years there's a prolonged silence. "I am so used to living one day at a time … I just couldn't think," she explained in an email several days later. "I have a lot of maintenance issues at hand – like a new roof to replace the 1897 slate roof in Lafayette and researching options as our funeral vehicles get older; tough decisions for me on my own, but my sons will help in those decisions so I'm not alone."

Dawn Fisher and sons, Jonathan (left) and Jacob (right) in the arrangement office of Fisher Funeral Chapel. (*Photos courtesy of Fisher Funeral Chapel/Rich Voorhees, Voorhees Studios*)

Passing the torch to the next generation is Dawn's passion, and she's trying to prepare them with all the knowledge she's learned the hard way. "My children have a 'gift' that comes only to those who have suffered a great loss ... empathy and compassion. And through the struggles they've seen me rise above it all," Dawn explained.

Perhaps it's very fitting, she added, that Jonathan's daughter – and her first grandchild – is named Gracelynn because, "in everything I do, I try to handle it with grace."

Given time to reflect on her future, Dawn is able to draw a rich and full picture of life in the next five years. "I look forward to enjoying Chase (a high school graduate in five years) and Sarah's (Class of '15) school years," she said. "We need to squeeze in vacations more ... something that has gone by the wayside for too long. Time is flying by too quickly. And then there's this children's book in my head that I've got to write …" •